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President Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, told visitors recently that world leaders would be wrong to suppose the United States is reluctant to use its power. The United States, he said, is merely "playing possum."

He did not mention that, even as he spoke, the president was rushing ahead with plans to invade Iran. My associate Dale Van Atta has spent three months piecing together the invasion plan. To protect military methods, some of the top-secret details cannot be printed. But this much can be revealed: The primary invasion target is Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf and possibly some of the southern Iranian oil fields.

Kharg Island is the site of the oil terminal through which 90 percent of Iran's crude is pumped into tankers for export. Not long after the U.S. hostages were seized in Iran, contingency plans were developed for an assault on Kharg Island.

Various alternate plans were prepared — ranging from a surgical strike on the pipeline that connects the island with the oil fields, to a military occupation of the island complex. "The plan was originally designed to compensate for not getting the hostages, kind of a tit for tat," explained a top source. "They'd have the hostages; we'd have their key oil depot."

Any military action should be taken swiftly, strategists urged, before the situation hardened. But Carter held back until his plunging political fortunes brought a change of heart. Then he decided to attempt rescuing the hostages in preference to invading Kharg Island.

Now the old contingency plans have been dusted off, and Carter is preparing for an October invasion. Here are some of the jigsaw pieces:

■ Carter made a secret decision last February to shift a spy satellite to cover the area. It took four months to get the satellite into position. Not until June did the satellite begin transmitting detailed photos, which are needed for the invasion preparations. These photos are still being analyzed.

■ More recently, 500 Air Force personnel were quietly transferred to Egypt. They were followed by a squadron of F-4 aircraft which began "training exercises" with the Egyptian air force. The same ploy was used last December to disguise air operations that later supported the hostage rescue attempt.

■ Under top security, the United States has been helping the Egyptians upgrade their air bases, which would be vital staging areas for an Iranian operation. Ultra-secret communications and military equipment have also been shipped to Egypt.

■ A special logistics force has been deployed at Diego Garcia, the only U.S. base in the Indian Ocean. At least six container ships were secretly loaded at Wilmington, N.C., with equipment for ground forces. "This logistical force could sail to a designated Persian Gulf area port in about five days," states a secret memorandum to the president. "There it would be met by the combat troops who have arrived by airlift. From this rendezvous point, they would draw their equipment and proceed to the objective area."

■ Finally, the plan calls for four of the Navy's 12 carrier task forces in the Indian Ocean. Two already have arrived; one is in the Mediterranean ready to move quickly through the Suez Canal; a fourth could reach the Persian Gulf in time for the operation.

The "winds of 120 days," a period of violent wind and dust storms that began in May, would hamper military operations in Iran during the summer. The president can argue, therefore, that October is a good time for the invasion.

But planners believe the timing is intended to save Carter's political skin. They suspect his real intent is to create a national emergency that will keep him in the White House. Political studies show that a president can increase his support dramatically by whipping up patriotic fervor.

As I've stressed in earlier columns, the invasion plan will not become operational until the president gives the green light. He would need some pretext for the invasion, such as the trial or execution of a hostage, sources say. But one planner acknowledged that "a justification could be easily publicized beforehand."

Meanwhile, Carter is continuing his secret diplomatic efforts to secure the release of the hostages. He would prefer to bring them home before the election by peaceful means. But sources close to the operation say that if the peaceful efforts fail, as expected, the president intends to activate the invasion plan. The risk, of course, is war.

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